



Change Agents – From Charity to Impact



By Larry Ottinger

“There is nothing to fear but fear itself.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

This is the worst of times for nonprofits and those with whom we serve; but it is also an opportunity for fundamental change in our sector and society.

Now is an opportunity for our sector to move boldly and decisively from charity to empowerment, from symptoms to root causes, from temporary to systemic, from curative to preventive, from silos to collaboration, from marginalization to impact, and from fear to leadership.

Our own country’s history clearly demonstrates that transformational changes require grass-roots organizing, public education and direct lobbying. Whether it was the abolition of slavery and child labor, extension of voting rights to women and African Americans, the provision of Social Security and a minimum wage for working families, or the environmental and consumer movements, a cycle of nonprofit advocacy has been at the center of change.

We now have a President-elect who credits his community organizing-background as a critical part

As Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said so forcefully at a pivotal moment earlier in our nation’s history, “Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy.”

In this time of pain and suffering for so many hard-working families and underserved communities, charities and philanthropy are being asked to do even more with far less. Those who advise and guide our sector must rise to this challenge. Together, we must see ourselves as change agents to finally transform our sector from a Victorian age of limited, noblesse oblige to a 21st century era of expanded, democratic partnerships for the common good.

How does systemic change that attacks the root causes of problems occur? Does change happen from the bottom up or the top down? One Jewish story, which provides a fitting metaphor for the charitable sector, says that change takes place from the inside out, from our hearts to the world.

of his success. During the campaign, he exhorted his supporters to be the change and to be active participants in the democratic process. So when the charitable sector looks at the cycle of advocacy that can create systemic change, let’s look at grass-roots organizing, at public education, at nonpartisan candidate and voter engagement, at the enactment and implementation of public policy (including lobbying), and, where necessary, at public interest litigation. These are the gears and wheels that propel our cycle of advocacy (or the tools in our advocacy toolbox if you prefer).

In particular, we must remind stakeholders in all sectors that service and advocacy go hand in hand in providing the greatest good for the greatest number. In *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact*



Nonprofits, Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant persuasively make the case that advocacy is an essential and complementary part of successful human and social services organizations. Indeed, in an environment of scarce resources, organizations that can combine service and advocacy will be at a competitive advantage.

We have a precious opportunity today to leverage federal resources to greatly expand national service programs and build the capacity of charitable organizations. It will take increased, effective grass-roots organizing and direct lobbying efforts to make this a priority and to make it so. FDR once told his own party activists, “I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it.” President-elect Obama admires FDR and wants to instill a new sense of national purpose. Fortunately, he is joined equally by Senator McCain and a bipartisan coalition of Americans across our country.

As we organize, let us remember that nonprofits are the best vehicles for civic engagement and that civic engagement includes nonpartisan organizing, education, policy and voting by our constituents and the public at large. If we think of service and advocacy as the two wheels of our high-performing bicycle, we know that we won’t get far without one of our wheels. With both in top condition, however, we know that there “ain’t no stopping us now.”

**"If you're not at the table,
you're on the table."**

In sum, a change agent is not unlike a community organizer – and we know that means it *does* entail the most difficult and time-consuming of challenges. To transform our sector finally and decisively from charity to impact will require a cultural paradigm shift that has been in process for several years. The next steps, like the ones before, will resemble the “tiny ripples of hope” that Robert F. Kennedy Jr. envisioned and that Eastern and Western Europeans celebrated together in finally bringing down the Berlin Wall.

Being a change agent means we must educate, empower and mobilize ordinary people and institutions to come together around a strategic vision for change. It means

that we must painstakingly break down silos, build trusting relationships, overcome fears and myths, leverage government and market forces, and tell the truth no matter how difficult it is.

With over one million charities in the nation now, we know that there will be triage and that we will need to identify and strengthen core organizations, while helping others to collaborate, merge or shut down in a smart and humane manner. The sector itself, sub-sectors and issue advocates will need to be much more rigorous in developing, implementing and evaluating strategic plans that not only care for individuals after public policies fail, but also attack the root causes of social problems before it’s too late. We must ensure that the voices of charities, of their constituents and the broader public are heard when public and private decisions are being developed and made, not after the fact. In health circles, this is called preventive medicine

Thus, to realize this future, advocacy must become an “ordinary, not extraordinary” part of what nonprofits and philanthropy do. Nonprofits must be at the policy table, not on it. If we are to live up to the promise that is America, if we are to live up to the vision that Alexis De Tocqueville saw in our sector in the early 19th century, if we are to create the “more perfect union” that our founders could only imagine and that our courageous ancestors greatly advanced for us, if we are to continue this journey and save our planet and all that we hold dear for our children and grandchildren now and forever, then we must not waver, we must firmly grab the baton and seize our moment and, in the words of Dr. King, “bend” that “arc of the moral universe...toward justice.”

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